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Gustavo Esteva & Madhu Suri Prakash

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Beyond development, what?

Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash

The authors begin to outline the epic now unfolding at the grassroots, arguing that pioneering social movements are groping for their liberation from the 'Global Project' being imposed upon them. Going beyond the premises and promises of modernity, people at the grassroots are re-inventing or creating afresh new intellectual and institutional frameworks. As is clear from the recent rebellion in southern Mexico, ordinary men and women are learning from each other how to challenge the very nature and foundations of modern power, both its intellectual underpinnings and its apparatus. Explicitly liberating themselves from the dominant ideologies, fully immersed in their local struggles, these movements and initiatives reveal the diverse content and scope of grassroots endeavours.

Introduction

From the outset, the 1980s looked like 'the lost decade for development' that they turned out to be. The public perception of development became highly unstable and volatile. The failures of the 'development decades' were widely recognized by scholars, politicians, and practitioners. Even as many began to cook up new development strategies, the idea of post-development age became fashionable in some circles. A burgeoning literature documented the theoretical and practical search for alternatives *to* development, while the dominant discourse on development alternatives appeared *d'eja vu*, a tiring and boring exercise in tautology, the end of the road, a dead end.

However, instead of marking the burial of a dead myth, the 1980s propped up and cosmeticized the corpse. The 1990s ushered in the era of re-development, along two distinct lines:

- In the North, the word 'mal-development' has acquired unexpected uses. Europe needs to be reshaped. The USA requires an extensive overhaul. Japan should accelerate her westernization. In all cases, what seems to be required is to *re-develop* what was mal-developed or is now obsolete. Everywhere, public attention is being called to the speed and conditions under which what was developed (socialized medicine, nuclear plants, steel production, pre-microchip manufacturing, polluting factories, or poisonous pesticides) must be destroyed, dismantled, exported, or substituted.

- In the South, re-development also means dismantling or destroying what was left by the 1980s' 'adjustment process', in order to make room for the latest leftovers from the North (atomic wastes, obsolete or polluting plants, unsaleable or forbidden commodities), for the *maquiladoras* (those fragmented and provisional pseudo-factories the North will maintain during the transitional period), and for ultra-modern transnationalized enclaves. The obses-

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sion with remaining competitive, the fear of being left out of the race, displaces and destroys complete sections of what was developed in the last 40 years. Re-development in the South also means the economic colonization of the so-called 'informal sector,' a massive assault on all forms of resistance to development.

Today, re-development is tinted green. The growing concern with ecological destruction, which originally included a radical critique of industrial society, has been progressively recycled. In the name of a reasonably green 'common future', 'sustainable development' has become the motto of the day—to sustain development itself, rather than to sustain nature or culture. Ecology operates increasingly as a cosmetic cover to protect—instead of prevent—the continuation of damaging processes.

'Basic needs' and 'popular participation', like other 1970s novelties, get a new lease of life as developers promise protection against the social short-sightedness of economic growth, and anti-populist and anti-statist measures define globalization. The welfare state will not be entirely dismantled, as some enthusiastically announced and many feared. But the 'Global Project' is being steadfastly implemented with no recognition of limits.[1]

The Washington Consensus, and the pragmatic policies often called neo-liberalism, are the latest substitutes for Truman's design for US hegemony, now that the Cold War is over and only one Superpower remains. The literature on post-development only generates more literature, joining post-modernism in an increasingly tiresome and sterile academic debate. Globalization is seen as a promise for some, and as a threat for others; but it is taken for a fact by all, an unavoidable prospect. Even countries like Cuba and North Korea are desperate to be included in that universal condition of the contemporary scene.

While this is happening within governments, international institutions, academic bodies, or NGOs, a rumour is going round *barrios*, *pueblos*, neighbourhoods, towns; wherever the cancer of re-development is laid bare. It is expressed in gossip, jokes, half-words, winks, smiles, a rumour nobody can spell out. 'What if development is left dead ... ?'

People spreading the rumour are often invisible; at other times they are seen as the 'problem' and the object of development. They have been portrayed as the ugly face of modern society, useless hand-me-downs of nothing and nobody, sterile remnants of the past, the classic target of wars against poverty for so long waged against them. Suddenly, in the midst of the challenges of the information era, they have gained new visibility. Some experts have just discovered them as a 'solution'. Others find in them the last frontier of arrogance, the last territory of conquest. Still others insist that they are the last refuge of simple joy and freedom, but fear that it is only a refuge and that it will not last long. But, what if ... ?

All over the world, ordinary men and women, the social majorities, the so-called Two/Thirds Worlds are saying °*Ya Basta!* Enough! to 500 years of colonization, to 50 of development or re-development.

The new social majority

As an unexpected side-effect of the four 'development decades', most people on earth were assigned to a new social category. Perceived only by exclusion, shovelled into the economy that is *not* public or private, they constitute the segment of the population that is *not* unionized, *not* formal, *not* with social security, *not* employed, *not* legal, *not* in the national accounts, *not* taxpayers, *not* a social class. They are always a *residual* category in both theory and politics. In the 1950s, they were described in Latin America in the vague notion of marginality. In the 1970s, after the famous ILO study on Kenya, informality substituted it; but both were used as synonyms or equivalents (Esteva, 1980).

No formal category renders an appropriate account of them. Economics, like the other social sciences, remains ambiguous and ambivalent about its margins. It claims rights over them: they belong to its realm and fall within the field covered by its laws and theoretical designs. But it also excludes them: margins are outlaws; they do not fit well into any of the designs of planners or developers; they are constantly trespassing the boundaries of economic territory to escape from its rules; they put a dent in the designs of the economists. Economics, consequently, loves and hates its margins, constantly seducing and rejecting them. It calls them to existence only to destroy and then refabricate them.

Economic theorists seek to hide or dissolve their schizophrenia. The margins are reinserted into the economic family as the category of those 'who-are-not-yet-but-will-become'. They are kin, since they cannot but belong to the universal species of *homo economicus* postulated by the economists. But they are not full-fledged members, since they are still in the process of acquiring the appropriate traits of economic rationality.

The people at the margins sense that economics is a dangerous political project. Their own political project demands that they *limit* the economy and confine it to *their* margins. They were 'educated' for many years that their opposition to the economic project militated against their own interests. They were also told that the extinction of their own ways of living and dying was a blessing and a positive transformation of their lives.

Despite this, the common sense of the common people still prevails. They refuse to see any blessing in the economic events that doomed their ancestors to physical extinction and now threaten their cultures and environment. The 1980s confirmed their worst fears of both economics and development and strengthened their resistance. Their own political project started to come to life.

The rise and fall of 'popular participation'

Two billion people became under-developed overnight in the post-war era. With the launching of global development, they were placed in the undignified position of having started on a road that others know better towards a goal that others have reached, a one-way street.

Development connotes, for the 'under-developed', at least one thing: escaping from their vague, unspeakable, undignified condition, with outside experts' guidance. Development appeared as the smarter, modern alternative to other political proposals, such as those of Gandhi in India and Cárdenas in Mexico, around which people were trying to walk again on their own feet, to follow their own road. The notion of under-development offered the magical formula of the 'not-yet'. Rostow construed for it a fantasia-like glamour, offering step-by-step advancement for becoming full-fledged economic insects (Rostow, 1960).

The constitution of the economy as an autonomous sphere, outside society and culture and at the centre of politics and ethics (Polanyi, 1944; Dumont, 1977), is an historical process affecting everyone. But people at the margins suffered this process in a different way, and their resistance has been more intense and enduring. In the post-war era, the differences and prospects of these people were redefined. Economics prepared a technical design for Truman, in the tradition of that prepared for the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie. In his speech (later called the Point Four Program) of 20 January 1949, Truman launched the political campaign for a world social experiment: to develop the underdeveloped. Never before had a word found universal acceptance the very day of its political coinage. But it happened to this one.

When it first shone on them, the intense light of development dazzled the peoples of the margins. For some time they were ambivalent towards 'incorporation', or the prospect of becoming *homines economici* fully inserted into the world market. Trying to protect their

environments and to strengthen their ways of life, they sometimes resisted development and openly opposed its promotion. At other times, having been lured by developers' promises, they clamoured for their 'incorporation' in the 'benefits' of development, a struggle taking the shape of the 'popular participation' of the 1970s and 1980s.

These 'new' social movements de-emphasised on the struggle for state power.[2] They seemed to be looking, instead, for their share of economic or political 'benefits' of development and more autonomy. Few seemed to be aware of the insurmountable contradictions between these two purposes. Immersed in the general prejudice about equality, they wanted to transform development's promises for all into commitments for everyone. They tended to express their claims in the form of *human rights*, a process through which they assimilated the various definitions of reality imposed upon them by the proponents of developments.

This fact was soon perceived by the Establishment. In the beginning, elites everywhere were very suspicious of 'popular participation' and vigorously resisted these initial attempts for people's participation in the decisions affecting their lives. However, once these decisions became defined in the terms proposed by the developers, it became possible to co-opt and recycle the demand for participation.

'Popular participation' was soon transformed into another sociological tool in populist or technocratic repertoire of ideological and political manipulation. It is still used to confer political legitimacy and technical elegance to developers' promotions and to governmental plans. In many countries, the rights so claimed were fully enacted: to education, to health, to employment, to housing; the rights of women or 'Indians' were recognized. Their 'full enforcement', however, neither offered due respect for people's liberties and initiatives nor gave universal access to public services. Rather, it translated into the proliferation of irrepressible bureaucracies and the expansion of regulations controlling people's lives.

The 'incorporation' and 'access' sought through 'popular participation' were thus completed—for a minority. The majorities became the new margins of 'under-developed' societies, themselves on the world's margins: in effect, the margins of the margins. 'Popular participation' thus gave even deeper roots, through the struggle for human rights, to the illusory goals of development. It contributed towards creating unbearable addictions—dependency without access—to the increasingly centralized services that were redefining people's needs (Illich, 1978).

The latest threat: green re-development

The so-called crisis of the 1980s posed an exceptional challenge and new openings to the people at the margins. Some of them, while suffering the same daily dramas as the impoverished middle classes, were better off than before.[3] The developers' paralysis unblocked new opportunities to promote their own projects and regenerate the livelihoods of those at the margins.

Thus, the 1980s opened new opportunities to express a new awareness. What people at the margins had always suspected, but dared not say before, started to be openly stated: development stinks, pollutes, and poisons. New Establishment experts documented what people at the grassroots already knew. They beautified their findings with every kind of deodorant, but offered analytical support for the existing insights of the 'under-developed': development was a world social experiment that had failed miserably in the experience of the world's majority whose 'incorporation' into the world market or the educational system, on equal and fair conditions, looked increasingly unfeasible. The gap between the centre and the margins was constantly widening. The goals of development were perpetually postponed;

a constantly receding point in time. The real nature of development was expected: a malignant myth whose pursuit threatens the world's majority, transforming their predicaments into a chronic nightmare, and creating the indignities of modernized poverty.

By 1985, the growing frustration with the pains and failures of development opened doors to the suggestion that there would not be a Fourth Development Decade. (Even the cynicism of international bureaucrats has a limit.) The future of development studies would be that of the archaeological examination of the ruins left by the experiment (Esteva, 1985; Sachs, 1989).

The age of post-development was thus poised to take off. 'A mere restoration of the ancient past—whatever the glory attached to it in collective memories—[was] out of question. But a forward run in the present path of development [was] equally absurd' (Rist, 1989). New dreams began to be dreamed to escape from the nightmare. The economic crises of the 1980s freed common men and women all over the world to rediscover the strength, richness, and vitality of their own political ventures and movements, rooted in their traditions. They started to shake off or even dismantle oppressive political regimes, in both North and South, with astounding sociological imagination and political vigour. One after the other, dozens of government regimes were dismantled or reshaped: from the more despotic, entrenched, rigid and dinosauric ones, like those in Romania and Chile, to the more flexible, 'modern', 'democratic', and 'progressive', such as those in India, Mexico, or Hungary.

At the same time, many people's initiatives revealed severe limitations; a tragic inability to get rid of the obsessions of development; a dramatic lack of interest or skill to translate their micro experiences into alternative macro designs. At the very edge of the radical departure embedded in or expressed by their initiatives, they seemed to stop short, stepping back, letting old views and political styles return. The political vacuum left by these limitations was immediately occupied by yet another wave of developers, ready to give development another lease of life.

The new development ethos emerging with the 1990s followed the two lines described earlier. Globalization became the universal catechism of governments, political parties, and international institutions. The coalition of political and economic forces giving birth to the WTO, the quintessential institution of our times, took for granted the leadership of the one remaining superpower and seemed clearly invincible. Celebrated as the end of history, or condemned as the tombstone of old dreams of emancipation, the new credo seemed to define the one and only path for the whole world in the twenty-first century: re-development now donning the latest, designer-made, green mantle of ecological fix-its.

Enough is enough

At midnight on 1 January 1994, NAFTA—the North America Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, the USA, and Canada—came into force. Mexico, according to its president, was on the verge of becoming a member of the First World. Barely two hours later, thousands of Indians armed with machetes, clubs, and a few guns occupied four of the main towns in the State of Chiapas on Mexico's border with Guatemala, and declared war on the Mexican government. Two dozen policemen and an unknown number of rebels died in the assaults.

The following day, President Carlos Salinas launched a massive attack upon the rebels, using tanks, Swiss aeroplanes, US helicopters, and 15,000 troops. Nobody knows the full extent of the violence that followed, but there were reports of civilian killings, torture,

summary executions, and unlawful detentions. Salinas dismissed the uprising as the work of 'a local group of professionals of violence, probably foreigners'.

The rebels soon revealed, however, that they were Indians of different ethnic groups, calling themselves the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberacion Nacíonal* (EZLN) or Zapatista National Liberation Army. Rebelling not only against the president and the army, they appealed for an end to 500 years of oppression and 40 years of development. Openly, they dared express the hope that a coalition of political parties would organize free elections and that the Indians would finally reclaim the autonomy of their commons, regenerating their own forms of governance and their 'art of living and dying'. The time had come to say '¡*Basta!* Enough!'

The ideological slant of the EZLN's declarations was puzzling: a guerrilla movement struggling for democracy, without aspirations to power or a Leftist orientation? An Indian movement not showing ethnic fundamentalism but opposing NAFTA? A movement of illiterate peasants talking about transnational capital and using electronic networks to gain support for their struggle?

Within days of the rebellion, opposition groups all over Mexico came out in support, not necessarily of the rebels' violent actions, but for their demands—while adding their own to the political agenda. The dimension and quality of this national mobilization were unprecedented. People occupied the streets, broke decades of press control, and gained access to wide communication networks both inside and outside Mexico. All the EZLN declarations—for freedom, justice and democracy—were broadcast to the outside world through fax and electronic mail as soon as they were released.

Mounting opposition at home and abroad, and an increasingly tarnished image, forced the government to change course. The president called a cease-fire and amnesty and made a number of political concessions. These included—of course—the promise of tons of money to everyone in Chiapas, particularly the rebels. He also appointed a personal Commissioner for Peace and Reconciliation. The EZLN accepted the dialogue with the Commissioner, on its own conditions. It started in February and ended two months later, when the EZLN said 'No' to the government's offer to the Indians: every and all forms of development.

Developed to death

The Chiapas uprising—and the support given to it throughout the nation—came as a shock to the Mexican government. The revolt was not against a *lack* of development—a call for cheaper food, more jobs, more health care and education. It arose because people opted for a more dignified form of dying.

There has been a constant allusion to death in the EZLN's communiqués. It is not mere rhetoric. Expelled from their lands, oppressed by a violent structure of power, with death visiting their children every day, they chose dignity. They knew they were confronting brutal forces; they had no hope of a military victory. They expected massive retaliation, that would kill most, perhaps all, of them.

Yet this apparently futile gesture caught the imagination of millions of people throughout Mexico. The EZLN launched an eloquent and unprecedented attack upon the process of development. Rather than demanding the expansion of the economy, either state- or market-led, the EZLN sought to expel it from their domain. The Indians now plead for protection of the 'commons' they cared out for themselves in response to the crisis of development: ways of living together that limit the economic damage and give room for new forms of social life. Within their traditional forms of governance, they keep alive their own modes of self-reliance and mutual help, informal networks for the direct exchange of goods,

services, and information, and an administration of justice which calls for compensation more than for punishment. They are challenging the social imagination to conceive political controls that allow these post-economic initiatives to flourish.

In the last three years, with ups and downs in the process of negotiation, the communities controlled by the EZLN have been surrounded by 50,000 troops. A low-intensity war pervades the whole State of Chiapas. Besieged and under heavy social and political pressures, however, the rebels continue to feed a new hope in many Mexicans, after the castle of illusions carefully constructed by former President Salinas fell apart with the financial crisis of December 1994, an event that the Director of the IMF called the first financial crisis of the twenty-first century. By pointing out that the emperor was naked, the EZLN generated a new and extensive popular mobilization, which changed the political balance of forces. On 6 July 1997, the political regime which had governed Mexico for 70 years was dismantled. Something radically new emerged. The first light of a new hope dawned on Mexico's horizon.

What if the new regime now emerging does not only provide a good democratic umbrella, but also an opportunity for social change? What if it recognizes the existence of the new commons, particularly Indians' commons? What if the people succeed in stopping development and using their own notion of what a good life is, following their own cultural patterns? What if they are finally able to practise their own art of living and dying, in dignity and with autonomy?

Such questions, defining new hopes, circulate today among Mexicans and others, about the puzzling consequences of these events. How could a country of 90 million inhabitants change at such speed? What is the nature of this change? Is this the last episode of the era of the Central American guerrillas, or a local uprising that will soon vanish? Is this another outmoded and doomed Leninist attempt to organize the peasantry, join the party, and smash the state? Or is it the first revolution of the twenty-first century, which may have profound effects in Mexico and elsewhere, and teach many lessons about contemporary, post-modern forms of social struggle and political power?

To challenge the rhetoric of development, however, is not easy. Mexico's economic growth, the promise of prosperity tendered by the IMF and the World Bank, the massive investment in modernity as an integral element of the war against poverty—these have been cast as Truths beyond question. In daring to question such 'certainties', the EZLN dares to declare to the world that development as a social experiment has failed miserably.

A new kind of movement

The unexpected grassroots support across the world for the EZLN movement lies in the fact that it encapsulates new aspirations. It owes little to the classic model of a Marxist guerrilla group since it eschews any political platform or ideology and has no interest in seizing power. It is not a fundamentalist or messianic movement: its members come from different Indian peoples, profess different religions, and are explicitly ecumenical. Nor is it a nationalist movement: it shows no desire for Chiapas to become a small state, an indigenous republic, or an 'autonomous' administrative district, in line with the demands of minorities in some other countries. The EZLN refuses to change the nature of the movement by becoming a political party.

As such, it is hard to categorize. It has no leader, and its collective leadership of elected representatives from 1,000 communities consciously resists any form of personality cult. 'Nothing for us, everything for all' is not an empty slogan. With it the EZLN maintains

the continuity of a long tradition of peasant and Indian rebellions that have had such an influence upon Mexico's history. Yet the EZLN is also a contemporary movement, using modern means of communication and adopting a political style and direction that might be termed 'post-modern'. It is born from disillusionment with the ballot-box and party-political apathy, and from popular resistance to conventional forms of participation.

The Chiapas uprising signals the emergence of a wider movement, a growing social awareness gathering momentum beneath the surface and circus of national party politics in Mexico and elsewhere. It comprises networks of groups—coalitions of discontents—which share certain characteristics: these networks are deliberately open and allow for the participation of different ideologies and classes; they distrust leaders and centralized political direction; they consciously avoid any temptation to lead or control the social forces they activate; they opt for flexible organizational structures which they use for concerted action rather than for channelling demands; they explicitly detach themselves from abstract ideologies, preferring to concentrate on specific campaigns (for example, against a dam, a road, a nuclear plant, or the violations of human rights); and they exhaust any democratic means and legal procedures available before resorting to direct action or revolt.

In early March 1994, the EZLN spokesperson replied to a 13 year old, who had written to him from Baja California, at the other extreme of the country, to ask about their use of violence. In response, the EZLN accepted that they are 'professionals'. 'But we are not professionals of violence, as the government said', he affirmed; 'our profession is hope'. The hope of the Zapatistas started an epidemic.

In January 1996, the EZLN hosted an Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neo-liberalism in the Lacandon jungle. Six thousand people attended, representing all kinds of struggles from more than 50 countries. Together, they founded the International of Hope, a web of all their struggles, which was followed up in the Second Intercontinental Encounter, held in Spain in July 1997.

> *We are people without name and face, who leave everything, even life itself, for others to be able to get up every morning without words to silence and without masks to confront the world. When that day arrives, we, the people without face and without name, will be able to rest under the ground … dead, yes, but happy.*

Perhaps it is foolish to suggest that the Chiapas uprising offers hope for the future. Mexico may yet be on the verge of more violence. Old and modern forms of fundamentalism are already on the rise, and the risk of a civil war, localized or not, is not out of the question. It will not be easy to dismantle a political regime so rigid and entrenched, or to stop all the forces of development still supporting the government.

However, the non-violent reactions of those coalitions of discontents have been so extensive, so full of imagination, strength, and creativity, so well rooted in people's organizations, that many still hope that there will be no need for more armed violence; and that with a new regime, Mexicans will be able to stop institutional violence.

Could new regimes combine government for the people, through representative democracy, with government by the people, in their new commons—the latter non-violently regenerating people's ancient traditions, their diverse arts of living and of dying with dignity?

Escaping from the outskirts: from marginality to new centres

An epic is unfolding at the grassroots. Pioneering social movements are groping for their liberation from the 'Global Project' being imposed upon them. Seeking to go beyond the premises and promises of modernity, people at the grassroots are re-inventing or creating

afresh intellectual and institutional frameworks, without necessarily getting locked into power disputes. Ordinary men and women are learning from each other how to challenge the very nature and foundations of modern power, both its intellectual underpinnings and its apparatus. Explicitly liberating themselves from the dominant ideologies, fully immersed in their local struggles, these movements and initiatives reveal the diverse content and scope of grassroots endeavours, resisting or escaping the clutches of the 'Global Project'.

Global Green Re-development can be subjected to two kinds of limits: 'structural impossibilities' and political controls. People at the margins are counting on both. As 'people of the outskirts', the periphery, the margins, they were forced to adopt the centres established by others. Consequently, they were forced to struggle to be included in those centres or even to seize them. The crises of these centres—in the 1980s and the 1990s—are being used by the people 'at the margins' to re-create and regenerate their own ancient historical centres as well as the new cultural ones. These parallel their efforts to marginalize the economy—an endeavour clearly stimulated by some of the 'structural impossibilities'.

At the grassroots, the *ghettos* created or regenerated in the 1980s continue to survive and flourish only if they establish their autonomy through protecting themselves from the constant assaults of the economy—national and increasingly international. Instead of allowing abstract human rights to yoke them more firmly to the development ethos, they prosper through creating new freedoms to sustain their autonomous spaces. Instead of 'popular participation', ephemeral or issue-based coalitions are spreading. Such coalitions are widening and strengthening the defensive capacity and the public impact of solid, well-grounded, grassroots organizations, flourishing both in rural villages and *barrios* of big cities. They represent fresh, creative reactions to the damaging effect of conventional party politics. They remain free of the ideological rigidities and bureaucratization of the so-called 'mass organizations', whose emphasis on individualism and abstract affiliation tended to dissolve communities and to discourage genuine and authentic political engagement.

The new grassroots initiatives represent political styles that expand the dignity of ordinary people and common human relationships by subverting the established and rigid political systems. These show 'progress' to be a dangerous faith that lacks any legitimate theoretical, historical, or political foundation. They reveal how the ideology of progress offers fundamental support—symbolic, spiritual, ideological and 'rational' to a whole gamut of ideas and beliefs incarnated in 'economy', 'development' and 'modernity'.

Grassroots initiatives are steadily opening fresh debates to establish alternative discourses: people's discourses, conducted not in cyberspace and media screens, but down to earth in their own local spaces. Justice and virtue are at the very centre of such discourses: real justice, emerging from the community, in the classic tradition, beyond Trotsky and Nietzsche (MacIntyre, 1981) and proper virtue, rooted in the soil, in the place, in the localized social space where real men and women live and die (Illich *et al.*, 1991).

In the creation of these new discourses, the Truths and sacred cows of the Establishment cannot but be challenged. At the grassroots, ordinary men and women are teaching and learning from each other how to bury the colonial myths—born with evangelization, spread through violent conquest, domination and education, and finally expressed in the last frontier of arrogance: the global invention of under-development. The hope of the 1990s lies in the ways people are waking up from the nightmare of global green re-development.

Grassroots post-modernism?

The Soviet Giant lies broken, scattered. The Berlin Wall no longer divides capitalists and socialists. The champions of the 'Global Project' seize the opportunity provided by the end

of the Cold War to announce the creation of One World in which all live together in the 'global village'. Finally, every individual can begin to claim human rights—*the* moral discovery of the modern era.

The modern era, however, is also ending. From their think-tanks and ivory towers, post-modern thinkers are deconstructing the castle of modern certainties, slaying the modern dragons: science and technology, objectivity and rationality, global subjugation by the One Culture—the 'culture of progress' spread across the world through the White Man's weapons of domination and subjugation.

While coming under the single banner of 'post-modernism', slayers of the modern hydra emerge from ideologically diverse academic camps. Yet these share an often unspoken consensus—not only of dissent, but also of assent. Some 'sacred cows' of the modern era continue to be revered; cows that are neither touched nor deconstructed; modern 'certainties' that retain their hold within the academy, even as all else begins to melt into thin air. These certainties constitute the still standing pillars for the world's 'social minorities',[4] the 'One/Third World', now living in fear that their familiar reality of jobs, markets, and welfare threatens to collapse around them.

They do not share this reality with the 'Two/Thirds World'. For the 'social majorities', all these features of the modern world remain alien to their daily lives. The word 'post-modern', coined in the academies of the 'social minorities', remains totally outside their vocabularies. Both the word and the intellectual fashions that have launched post-modernism might as well be occurring on another planet.

At the same time, the promise and the search for an era beyond modernity are a matter of life and death, of sheer survival, for these struggling billions—whom social planners call 'the masses', 'the people', or 'common' men and women. Daily, they are compelled to invent post-modern social realities to escape the 'scientific' or even the 'lay' clutches of modernity. For them, modernization has always been, and will continue to be, a gulag that means certain destruction for their cultures.

The language and conceptual framework of academic post-modernism are clearly of no use to the 'social majorities' in seeking to escape the modern holocaust looming over them. They are as ill-equipped as those of modernism to describe the experiences of these *down under* billions, struggling to survive the horrors, destruction and threats that the 'social minorities' present to their selves and soils, their communities and cultures.

For many years, observing or participating in some of these grassroots struggles, we could not speak about them. Caught and constrained within the trap created by modern words and concepts, we suffered an incredible impotence, a peculiar inability to articulate what we were seeing and experiencing with people at the grassroots. The modern categories in which we were 'educated' would not permit us to understand and celebrate today's grassroots post-modern pioneers. Rather than a solution to this predicament, academic post-modernism imposed additional barriers for us. For their part, not trapped within the modern language net or the 'reality' of 'educated' modern persons, the 'social majorities' who have created that post-modern epic seem to share our difficulties in articulating their experiences of modernity.

'Grassroots post-modernism' appears at first glance like a contradiction in terms: an impossible marriage of the scholarly and illiterate; a fancy academic concoction to give a new lease of life, however ephemeral, to the fast fading fashion of academic post-modernism.

Yet, we stand by our juxtaposition of 'grassroots' and 'post-modernism'. For all its oddities in bringing together two distinct worlds, we find it useful for presenting radical insights, which include exploding the meaning of both of its components.

Through the marriage of 'grassroots post-modernism', we are trying to give birth to another school of post-modern thought. Instead, bringing these terms out of the confines of

academia to far removed and totally different social and political spaces, we hope to identify and name a wide collection of culturally diverse initiatives and struggles of the so-called illiterate and uneducated non-modern 'masses' who are pioneering radical post-modern paths out of the morass of modern life.

The epic to which we allude does not include all grassroots movements or initiatives. The Shining Path, the US or German Nazis or Neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, the Anandamargis and others of this ilk are, in our view, fully immersed in modernity or pre-modernity. 'Grassroots' is an ambiguous word, which we still dare to use because its political connotation identifies it with initiatives and movements coming from 'the people': ordinary men and women who autonomously organize themselves to cope with their predicaments. We want to write about 'common' people without reducing them to 'the masses'.

Peoples beyond modernity: sagas of resistance and liberation

Dramatically exacerbating five centuries of modernization during the past four 'Development Decades' (Sachs, 1992), the 'social minorities' are *consuming* the natural and cultural spaces of the world's 'social majorities' with the stated intention of developing them for 'progress', economic growth, and humanization.

For their part, with sheer guts and a creativity born of desperation, the 'social majorities' continue resisting the inroads of that modern world into their lives, in their efforts to save their families and communities, their villages, ghettos, and *barrios*, from the next fleet of bulldozers sent in to make them orderly or clean. Daily, the blueprints of modernization, conceived by conventional or alternative planners for their betterment, leave 'the people' ever less human. Forced out of their centuries-old traditional communal spaces into the modern world, they suffer every imaginable indignity and dehumanization by the minorities. Their only hope of a human existence, of survival and flourishing for the 'social majorities', thus lies in the creation and regeneration of post-modern spaces.

The so-called 'neo-liberal' policies are pushing the 'social majorities' even further into the wastelands of the modern world. Relegated to its margins, they are 'human surpluses': making too many babies—an 'over-population'; increasingly disposable and redundant for the dominant actors on the 'global' scene. They cannot be 'competitive' in the world of the 'social minorities', where 'competitiveness' is the key to survival and domination. The dismantling of the welfare state, designed and conceived to protect the 'benefits', dignity, income, and personal security of the world's 'social minorities' means little to the 'social majorities'. As 'marginals' they have never had any real access to the 'benefits' enjoyed by those who occupy the centres of the modern world. While some 'marginals' still strive to join the ranks of those minorities—struggling to retain their jobs, their social security, or their education—many more are avoiding the trap of modern expectations of relying on the market or the state.

The collapse of the market or the state is creating new opportunities for the marginals, assigned to the ghettos, the dregs, to stand on their own feet, and to stop waiting for handouts or the fulfilment of all the false promises of equality, justice, and democracy. Reaffirming themselves in their own spaces, they are daily creating the social frontiers of post-modernity; finding and making new paths with wit and ingenuity. The inevitable breakdown of modernity that terrorizes modern minorities is being transformed by the non-modern majorities into opportunities for regenerating their own traditions, their cultures, their unique indigenous and other non-modern arts of living and dying.

David and Goliath

In following post-modern stories of ordinary men and women, at the grassroots, we seek to learn from their communal ingenuity and cultural arts for escaping or going belong the mono-culturalism of the modern world. In exploring their brands of post-modernism, we explicitly resist the urge of all modern experts to 'help' or 'educate' the masses to join the mainstream minority march, headed onwards and forward towards global progress and development.

Instead, we are inspired to join them in weaving the fabric of their evolving epic—all too human and yet so grand, revealing courage as much as the follies and foibles of those *down under* to be themselves; to retain and regenerate their cultures, despite the odds that threaten their lives and spaces.

Our stories are not about Promethean heroes; giants who Think Big. Instead, they draw upon the experiences of common men and women in *barrios* and villages—like the *Zapatista* movement, which we continue to know and learn from 'up close'. What relevance can these grassroots stories have for others across the world who seek liberation from global forces? What can others learn from a provincial movement of desperately impoverished and oppressed peasants struggling for their cultures, shamed and silenced for five centuries? Is it possible that such a small movement, militarily insignificant, can be of help to other oppressed peoples? Its relevance to other Indian movements or marginals in the Third World needs, perhaps, no explanation. However, how can we explain the fact that people in over 100 countries reacted to the *Zapatista*s' liberation initiatives with meetings, encounters, mobilizations, and thousands of specific proposals? How do we explain the fact that two Italian villages declared themselves *Zapatista*, stating that their questions and ventures are also their own? How to explain the independent initiatives that started disseminating daily news and comments about the *Zapatistas* through three electronic networks only weeks after the initial rebellion? Or which a few months later, were publishing books in at least five languages in 10 countries? How to explain the reaction in five continents to their invitation to the 'international' of hope, overcoming the oppression of global neo-liberalism?

By studying the impact of this movement, we cannot but recognize that it is not just a 'case', a curiosity, or a 'model' for sociologists, anthropologists, political philosophers, or critical cultural theorists interested in multicultural education. In drawing different lessons from the *Zapatistas*, we are not constructing an ideal type or the 'best' representation of what is happening at the grassroots. We do hope, however, that we will contribute to explaining why such culturally diverse groups of peoples continue to find this movement so very relevant for their own struggles. They identify themselves with the suggestion that 'the actions of the Mayan Indians in Chiapas and the way they have circulated in Mexico, to North America and around the world, have some vital lessons for all of us',[5] 'us' being peoples interested in finding ways to react against the evils plaguing the lives both of the 'social minorities' and the 'social majorities' all over the world.

Beyond the three sacred cows

The emerging epic of grassroots initiatives for resisting the oppressiveness of modern minorities represents a clear rupture with some of the most fundamental premises of the modern era. In doing so, it leads the way in radically confronting some modern 'sacred cows' (with apologies to the hindus). Even academic post-modernism has still not dared to dissect or deconstruct them. As evident facts, certainties or moral ideals, they cannot be questioned by modern minds. However, the post-modern minds of people at the grassroots

liberates them from those 'certainties', seen as unsustainable and unbearable; a horizon that they do not share.

As French workers recently demonstrated in their disputes with the state, everywhere people are seeking ways to protect themselves against the threats posed by the current 'global wave' to their jobs and security, their natural and social environments, their beliefs and expectations. Strikes and struggles like these are, however, only brakes designed to slow down the pace of the transformation or to reduce the damage of the 'Global Project'. They are not challenging the Project itself, or its foundations; but, instead, the way in which it is being implemented or its unequal benefits and impacts.

In contrast, however, peoples genuinely tired of following the Great March of Progress now doubt the certainties which post-modern thinkers have left intact, and about the meaning of struggles which involve getting locked into power disputes inside the nation-state. They are thus finding clear inspiration in the new people's struggles (no matter how distant or alien these seem) to conceive and implement their own initiatives for transformation. In France, during the recent strikes, many workers found that for the first time in years they actually had the opportunity to talk to each other about their predicaments, being, just for a change, free from the frantic pace of their daily industrial lives. Something radically new started to emerge in those informal talks spontaneously starting in the paralysed metro or railway system: 'the importance of conversation', declared an editorial of *Le Monde*. Among rumours and shared puzzlements, new debates started in marginal *quartiers* or villages. Our accounts, we hope, will be useful to peoples in diverse contexts as they articulate and implement their own initiatives for cultural and communal regeneration or transformation.

Gazing at the grassroots epic unfolding before us, we focus upon three modern sacred cows.

The *first* is the myth of *global thinking*, the intellectual counterpart of the global economy. The promoters of economic globalization worship the economic system that has raised the 'standard of living' of the 'social minorities' over the centuries. During the last four Development Decades, they have made every kind of unfulfillable promise to bring this benefit to the rest of humanity, now and for eternity. Economic globalization, they now affirm, will do what the four Development Decades failed to provide. It will bring manna to all the peoples of the world; that is, the 'goods' and 'social services' currently enjoyed by the modern minorities; ballot boxes, healthcare, schools, paved roads, telephones, super-highways, flush toilets, toilet paper, among others. Many of these 'goods' and 'services' are classified by the world's 'social minorities' under the modern moral umbrella of 'human rights'. To shelter under this umbrella, people all over the world must abandon their own culturally specific and local ways of living and dying, of thinking and working, of suffering and healing, of eating and defecating, in order to become a part of the global economy. The latter is being forged by those who actually believe that it is both possible and necessary to Think Global. Modernizers and post-modernizers alike assert that global thinking is superior to local thinking. Equally clear, for them, local thinking is limited, parochial, and backward.

While academic post-modernists have taken *scientific rationality* by the horns, grassroots post-modernists are going beyond them in proceeding to do the same to the modern 'certainty' of *economic rationality*. Grassroots struggles to resist the destruction of their local spaces by modernizers and developers (sustainable or not, including the proponents of Green or Eco-Development) go far beyond academic post-modernism, turning on its head the modern myth regarding the rationality of *homo economicus*. By regenerating the different forms of rooted local thinking which inspire local actions, grassroots groups are learning how to keep economic thinking at the margins of their social lives, regenerating the traditions of

the 'social majorities', as they have thought and acted for centuries. Now in its global phase, the plague of economic thinking and living, like AIDS, is contaminating non-economic cultures that are defined by local, communal, thinking. The modern world can spread its economic tentacles only by destroying local cultures that keep it outside their social margins. Criticizing the 'marginals" resistance as the ignorance of the uneducated, globalizers warn and threaten that without the global economy, human rights cannot be universally enforced.

The universality of human rights is the *second* modern sacred cow. It constitutes *the* moral justification behind Think Global. Equally sacrosanct for academic post-modernists and modernizers, it is no surprise that they do not touch the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) with their knives of dissection and 'deconstruction'. These rights, in fact, continue to be salvaged from the junk-heap of deconstructed modernity as *one* (if not *the*) significant moral contribution. They constitute for many the gift of the modern era to the post-modern age. Academic post-modernists engaged in race, class, and gender studies, seeking to liberate multiculturalism from patriarchal western hegemony, dream of a world in which all those women and children, those classes and races deprived of their human rights in the modern era, will finally be 'saved', a salvation supposedly secular and culturally neutral or transcultural. In the morally progressive, egalitarian, and just global economy of the post-modern era, every individual will enjoy exercising his or her human rights. The western re-colonization inherent in the global declaration of these human rights remains as imperceptible to post-modernists as to the modernists they accuse of cultural imperialism.[6]

At the very core of this re-colonization by human rights, claiming their universality despite differences in traditions, faith, and moral outlook, stands the modern *individual self*. In the myth of the individual self, we discern the *third* sacred cow of modernity. Finally liberated from his or her pre-modern strings, the modern self can be fully incorporated into the 'global economy', a member with full rights and privileges of the club, joining the society and culture of *homo economicus*. Neither modernists nor their post-modern academic critics dare to recognize the transmogrification of the human condition operated through the individualization of 'the people'. Neither group seems capable of even conceiving 'the good life' other than that defined or sought by the individual self, suffering within the unbearable straitjacket of loneliness. All that contemporary communitarians seem to conceive or offer are devices and techniques for plugging the contemporary individual self into social constructs which create the illusion of 'inter-personal connectedness'.

To modern eyes, shaped by constant exposure to the so-called 'precision' of formal categories, it may be useful to see that the historical experience of the modern era is not to be traced to a specific 'group', 'movement', 'organization', but, instead, to a wide variety of initiatives, taken by ordinary men and women, who *reacted against* the pre-modern structures that locked them in. Great thinkers and political movements were of course involved in that process, but none was 'responsible' for it.

There is a similarity to the situation we discern in this unfolding era of grassroots post-modernism. The grassroots initiatives to which we allude and upon which we draw are autonomously organized by 'the people' themselves, for their own survival, flourishing, and enduring; both independent from and antagonistic to the state and its formal and corporate structures; hospitable to 'the Other' and thus open to diversity; mainly expressed in reclaimed or regenerated commons, both urban and rural, and clearly concerned with the common good, both natural and social.

In addition to the burgeoning literature about such grassroots initiatives in journals like *The Ecologist* or *Fourth World Review*, there are new groups of independent institutions which are trying systematically to document and disseminate their experiences. Notable among these are the Intercultural Institute of Montreal in Canada; Opción and Promoción del

Desarrollo Popular (PDP) in Mexico; PRATEC, in Peru, HISBOL in Bolivia, and REDES in Uruguay; Claude and Norma Alvares' The Other India Book Store, to mention only a smattering—far, far less than even the tiny tip of the proverbial iceberg. All these organizations, and the many thousands like them, are actively involved in their local or regional struggles at the grassroots. They tend to operate as 'hinges' connecting the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the movements.

The epic which we can only very roughly begin to outline here, has not yet evolved to the point in which it is an *Iliad*, a *Mahabharata*, or a *Popol-Vuh*. Inspired as we are by its tentative beginnings, we hope that many others will be similarly moved to grope further, going beyond these early rough sketches into writing full sagas that celebrate 'common' men and women.[7]

Uneducated and illiterate, the people at the grassroots continue escaping the education that perpetuates the three sacred cows along with the other myths of development. As every development expert knows, education is the best tool for maintaining the myths of development. Walking beyond these myths remains easier for those who lack the crippling dependencies and needs of the educated.

Hope from the margins

When its time comes, every era dies. If human beings recognize this and dare to be surprised by the emerging historical events, the old era dies with dignity and peace and the new one flourishes with joy and passion. Otherwise, dying becomes a chronic condition, all kinds of pests spread around the unburied corpse, and the new era must be build on the ruins of the old.

But humans fear death and prefer to believe every promise of eternal life, every disguise of threatening agonies. Before dying, every era spends its life remnants concealing its real condition. Images of rise and splendour allow people to interpret every symptom of decadence as transitory anomalies, proper to maturity and success. The last pharaoh, the last king, or the last tsar died with the illusion of leaving behind them an everlasting empire.

The time has come for the end of the economic era. Development, once offering the hope of eternal life to economic societies, has instead dug their graves. Evidences of the new era, appearing everywhere, are still perceived as anomalies of the old. The old one, in turn, looks stronger than ever, the death it is carrying still perceived as a symptom of vitality. If we are fooled by such images, disguised with the slogans of the period, and are blind to the evidence of the new era, economy will continue to dismantle and destroy its own creation.

There are diverse options and alternative paths leading beyond the oppressive reign of *homo economicus* and *homo educandus*. Common men and women are leading the way in walking down these footpaths, away from development's salvation, towards options that offer genuine hope to the social majorities.

Notes

1 We use the expression the 'Global Project' to allude to the collection of policies and programmes, promoted world-wide by the governments of the industrialized countries and their 'friends': the international institutions and corporations equally committed to the economic integration of the world and the market credo (based on the modern doctrine of the self-regulating market, as described by Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation)*. Other 'friends' include most heads of state as well as the elites of 'under-developed' states that aspire to 'catch up' with the 'social minorities' of the 'developed' nations in the global race for 'progress' and 'development'.

2 This cooling-off came partially from the failure in 'assaulting the power' (guerrilla) and the disillusionment about elections (Allende). On the other side, some movements—like ethnic, women's, and local movements—are not struggling to get state power for their own members.

3 Several factors contribute to explain this paradox situation: the people at the margins can increase their incomes faster than inflation, in contrast with salaried people, who sank with their buying power; they can easily diversify their activities, a flexibility salaried people also lack, finding new spaces and opportunities when the conventional ones are depleted; and often they are able to produce their own ways of life, thus avoiding dependencies of the market or the institutions (see Esteva, 1985, 1987).

4 The 'social minorities' are those groups in both the North and the South that share homogeneous ways of modern (western) life. Usually, they adopt as their own the basic paradigms of modernity. They are also usually classified as the upper classes and are immersed in economic society: the so-called 'formal sector'. The 'social majorities' have no regular access to most of the goods and services defining the average 'standard of living' in the industrialized countries. Their definitions of 'a good life', shaped by their local traditions, reflect their capacities to flourish outside the 'help' offered by 'global forces'. Implicitly or explicitly, they neither 'need' nor depend upon the bundle of 'goods' promised by these forces. They, therefore, often share a common freedom in their rejection of 'global forces'. The previous classification of people and nations into North and South or First, Second, and Third Worlds (and the Fourth and the Fifth) is clearly outdated. Our ideal types can be associated with the One/Third World (the 'social minorities' in both North and South) and the Two/Thirds World (the 'social majorities').

5 See Harry Cleaver, 'The Chiapas uprising and the future of class struggle in the New World Order', in *Riff-Raff*, Padova, Italy, February 1994.

6 Human rights were born against power abuses. They still are a very effective tool against authoritarian regimes, including those that having imposed on their peoples the 'rule of law' then violate it, in what can be seen as an abuse of the abuse. They are also used against 'pre'modern' abuses. The critique of human rights is a very delicate surgical operation that should not, as it were, result in throwing the baby out with the bath water. We attempt to perform this, in a rigorous way, in *Grassroots Postmodernism*, Esteva and Prakash (1998a).

7 To begin to sketch their stories, we have recently completed two books: *Grassroots Postmodernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures* (London: Zed Books, 1995); and *Escaping Education: Living as Learning at the Grassroots*. These aim to begin the telling and retelling of human stories, of struggles again forces inhuman or evil, which are woven into the fabric of all great epics, pre-modern as well as post-modern. They are stories in which the heroes are ordinary men and women, rather than supermen and celebrities.

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The authors

Gustavo Esteva is a grassroots activist, journalist and author, and former adviser to the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). He lives in an Indian village in southern Mexico where he works with grassroots groups, mainly Indian. Contact details: Cordabones 24, San José Insurgentes, Mexico DF 06900, Mexico. E-mail: <insopcion@infosel.net.mx>.

Madhu Suri Prakash is a full professor of education at the Pennsylvania State University and is Professor-in-Charge of Educational Theory and Policy. She has been a Spencer Fellow at the National Academy of Education and has undertaken extensive research in India. Contact details: The Pennsylvania State University, 319 Rackley Building, University Park, Pennsylvania, PA 16802, USA. E-mail: <kometa@unv.ernet.in>.